

# Setting in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"

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## ABSTRACT

"Heart of Darkness" is a crucial work in the development of modern literature, as it establishes the main theme of twentieth-century writing: fear and disillusion about the western man's place in the world and the values by which he lives. Joseph Conrad witnessed the violence and hypocrisy of colonizing culture travelling up the Congo and revealed his experience in his novel what he calls the "*Heart of Darkness*", the book is an authentic material. The setting of Conrad's "*Heart of Darkness*" is extremely essential to the story. The setting affects the mood, the characterization and the plot development. The setting allows for more realistic plot development, and as a result, more credible characters.

**Keywords:** violence and hypocrisy, authentic material, setting, plot development, characterization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Congo region, where Marlow is traveling to find and return with Kurtz, is a relatively unknown part of the world. The setting of the novella is shifted from one place into another covering most parts of Europe and Africa. The story begins with Marlow set on a boat, the Nellie, on the Thames river in England telling the story of his experiences on The Congo river and the Congo country under the oppression of Belgian Empire. Two rivers, the Thames and the Congo helps to demonstrate that whites are superior to blacks and how white people are severe and dark in heart. The example of the story ending on the Thames river described by an unseen narrator can show us what the author intends to say us: "*The offing was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky- seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness.*" (*Heart of Darkness*)

With every cruelty Marlow witnesses, the reader is more horrified; we learn more about Kurtz and Marlow—the setting provides the opportunity for characterization. Part of the suspense of the story rests in the unknown dangers in the jungles. This also comes from the story's setting.

## 2. ANALYSIS

All this prepares the reader for butchery, human sacrifice, and Kurtz's complete moral degradation — the same man who is worshiped by the natives as their chief...like a god. When Kurtz is found, he is completely mad and physically ill — changed by what he has done and what he has seen. The protagonist of the book Kurtz is an example of a corrupted man by the effect of time and place. Setting has influenced on him so obviously and largely that his consciousness stopped analyzing his behavior. Kurtz is a European first-class agent operating in Africa on behalf a Belgian trading company. As a European civilized man, Kurtz has a right to control and force his culture and knowledge to be accepted by the Africans. The "International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" sends him to Africa to fulfill this noble mission of civilizing, educating, and enlightening the Africans. Kurtz is seen as the representative of Western culture and civilization. His mother was half-English, his father half-French. All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz, in response he corresponds European imperial consciousness. However, in Africa, Kurtz has lost the physical, mental, or moral qualities considered normal and desirable. He experiences several changes; precisely the changes that Kurtz has undergone affected his psyche.

Kurtz was unable to marry his fiancé because of financial constraints in Europe. To solve this problem, he decides to join a Belgian company. In Africa, Kurtz is isolated from his original social and cultural background. This geographical and cultural separation views his disappointment and subsequent madness. This is a fact that when an individual is cut off from a civilized society he is apt to show changes to become rude, bad behavioral and antisocial. Kurtz is a clear example of this: his barbaric nature kept under control by strict moral norms in Europe arouse out in Africa.

Freud says: Civilization describes the whole sum of the achievements and regulations which distinguish our lives from those of our animal ancestors and which serve two purposes-namely, to protect men against nature and to adjust their mutual relations. ( Thorschwell, 2000: 105).

We must feel Kurtz's real situation to correctly analyze him. For instance, living in a developed and governed by rules society it is difficult to earn money by robbing or forcing someone. When he needs money, he has to go to Africa to get the riches by hook or by crook that he couldn't legally get in Europe. In Africa Kurtz's thoughts are not different from the beliefs of the rest of the Europeans who felt charged with the function to civilize the Africans. But as he becomes the absolute ruler for a long period, these noble thoughts gradually fade and give way to original hidden personality.

### 3. DISCUSSION

Analyzing the character of Kurtz, I have reached the following conclusions: European society full of laws, religions and values doesn't allow Kurtz to behave as an imperialist ruler, being conscious of his surroundings Kurtz behaves in a normal way.

As Kurtz makes his way into the interior of the jungle he begins to change. Being away from his civilized society in Europe Kurtz's psyche degenerates because of the alien, primitive surroundings in Africa. As there are no moral restrictions to limit his acts he easily gives in the forces of darkness losing his control over his actions.

As we know Kurtz is a man with many talents, however he was skilled in his own country whereas in Africa he turns into a greedy, cruel man. Being kept under the control of strict moral and social restrictions in civilized Europe he couldn't demonstrate his power. Coming to colonial and uncivilized Africa was a chance for him to have an absolute authority, the power to order and kill. His desire for power and wealth in Africa results in going into the psychological hollowness, moral disease and madness. Kurtz's madness becomes physical, so that his bodily sickness is a reflection of his diseased mind. His slow, painful spiral into death is marked by visions and indeterminate nightmare. Parts of the narrative tell the emptiness of Kurtz's soul; this may be a commentary on the weak and subversive power of the wilderness to sap all the humanity out of a man.

Ultimately "Heart of Darkness" is a story of the hazards and risks of greed, desire, and the corruption of ideals and values by the darkness that dwells within all of mankind. It tells of the madness that the greed for riches or power can create within the heart and mind, and that even the best of intentions can become turned into something immoral and corrupted.

"Heart of Darkness" narrates about how the isolation and removal from civilization in the African jungle causes Westerners to lose some of their moral senses. The characters of the book Kurtz, Russian agent Harlequin and manager of the company venturing into the jungle become harsh, freedom caused them to lose their morality and their rational sense. Marlow mentions this theme early on:

*"Land in a swamp, march through the woods, and in some inland post feel the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed round him,-- all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men. There's no initiation either into such mysteries. He has to live in the midst of the incomprehensible, which is also detestable".*

### 4. CONCLUSION

Marlowe's idea is that the wildness and darkness of the jungle removes the self-consciousness that have been built up in civilization. Because men feel isolated from their moral norms, they start to believe that they can do anything and everything, without effects. The result of this freedom from moral observation is a loss of sense as the conditioned mind tries to restore its evil acts with what it "knows" to be true. Marlow feels a certain amount of this by the end, but has not gone as far as Kurtz, and so survives with his moral sense not destroyed or not entirely unharmed. Through Kurtz's duality which is

dramatized here by Conrad we may conclude that a man can change his behavior according to his geographical and societal surroundings.

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